

## Working Through Uncertainty and Confusion to Achieve Project Success

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**Stephen Harrison, PMP**

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**Abstract:** Every endeavour we pursue necessarily involves change, and change stirs up confusion and uncertainty. **Fog** represents any chaos or confusion (loss of clarity) we face, whether in performing a project, pursuing personal or organisational goals, or as we seek to develop an effective team.

Much energy is expended by organisations and individuals to create order and clarity. Many of us will artificially create clarity and certainty because confusion and not knowing is uncomfortable. Though clarity is important, we also need to know when, how and why to tolerate and work within fog and appreciate it for what it offers.

We need to know when to let the fog be present, and when to clear it.

Our ability to deal with fog requires key competencies such as:

- leadership with its vision building and taking others with us in pursuing that vision
- interpersonal communications and how we understand issues experienced by stakeholders
- conflict management
- emotional intelligence where we monitor, manage and master our own responses to change.

To be effective in managing projects we need to effectively manage our response to fog, and also recognise, respond to and manage the impact of fog on stakeholders and their reaction to it.

This paper examines:

- What fog is and how to recognise it
- Factors that create fog in project environments
- Benefits of properly managed fog
- Common mechanisms used by people to reduce fog and how these may manifest as issues we see on our projects
- Effective strategies for navigating through the fog

### Introduction

As a natural phenomenon, Fog may instil serenity, peace and tranquillity or frustration and chaos. Our circumstances - we are doing, our sense of urgency, the level of resistance we exhibit because of its presence – determine our perception of it. Mild forms of fog impair our visibility slightly. We may be blinded in more intense fog. Our emotional and mental responses may be heightened and our ability to deal effectively with the situation may be consequently reduced. If you watch travellers at a fog-bound airport you will see growing frustration and agitation. The longer the delay the more people exhibit reactive behaviours and lose their calm. The result is increasingly strong levels of chaos and confusion among the group.

Similar manifestations of fog also occur in a project environment. Our clarity gets clouded, the team loses its sense of cohesion, momentum is lost, and conflict and confusion may develop. Fog may be experienced by the individual. It arises between individuals, most often recognised as conflict, regardless of whether it is cognitive (about issues, approaches, practices, purpose etc) or affective (interpersonal) conflict. Between individuals and groups it may be seen as different agenda, disagreements over priorities and use of resources, schedules, and any other points of discussion. It is up to the project manager to recognise potential and real issues and deal with them effectively to maintain project progress. The project manager must keep all stakeholders aligned with the project objectives, and strengthen the team effectiveness.

Factors that contribute to fog in the project environment include:

- unclear, conflicting or continually changing organisational, project, and personal objectives
- differences of opinion
- ethical issues
- diversity in values and beliefs across the stakeholders
- varying reasons for participating
- personal issues brought into or compounded by the project environment
- inconsistent levels of commitment from management
- changing project sponsorship
- morale issues due to project problems
- issues that stem from the wider organisation (e.g. restructuring)
- work progressing beyond the level of planning (i.e. team is running blind)
- differing understanding about requirements; unstable requirements
- pressure and stress because of issues and deadlines
- tiredness
- anger, frustration, worry, depression, and other "negative" emotions
- lack of confidence, insecurity, and other issues relating to self-worth
- Lack of information
- Lack of experience
- Adversarial approaches exhibited by participants when working with others (e.g. from/to team, suppliers, management etc)

As project managers it is important that we recognise factors that contribute to fog, and which unsettle the project environment, making it more difficult to manage. The problem is that as fog develops navigating our way becomes difficult. The path is obscured by the very issues we wish to steer around. We must be able to deal with ambiguity and not become overwhelmed by uncertainty.

## Recognising Fog

Project managers are people with their own insecurities, foibles, personal issues etc, and their own patterns for exhibiting these. Before we manage others we must first manage ourselves, or our issues are likely to be projected on to and mirrored back to us by those around us. We get to experience from others everything we have not dealt with internally.

Two instinctual motivators for all creatures are those of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Where a situation provides potential for both pleasure and pain, avoiding pain tends to be the stronger influence. Even when we know an outcome will be good for us, the pain involved in achieving it creates resistance. As humans we have the ability to master these fundamental behaviours, to some extent at least. We have many examples of outstanding individuals who have chosen to face significant pain (physical, emotional, mental and/or spiritual) and come out triumphant (whether in sport, business, battle or other environment). In every situation in life these two drivers play a part, and how we deal with them are based on our values, beliefs, and rules we live by.

## Sources of Pain

There are three key sources of pain, all of which we seek to avoid if possible. They are:

- attachments to the past that are stretched or broken
- personal protections that are shattered
- expectations that we fail to realise

**Attachments** to the past include such things as relationships with family, friends and others, memories, and anything else that link us to the past, the people we have known, and our experiences. Tragedy involving someone we love is a classic example of how having these attachments stretched or broken creates pain for us. In the work environment people become attached to those they associate with, the job they do, and their routines. Even the things that they don't like are familiar and are sources of attachment. As a project manager we often find ourselves the cause of disruption to others' status quo, and it is little wonder that we face resistance from others. We are creating pain for them. Often attachments are less of an issue for the PM who is working under a basic achievement motivation, but for the majority of stakeholders who work from a basis of affiliation with others, it can be a very disconcerting experience, even when they want the change.

**Personal protections** comprise all the values, rules and beliefs we maintain to shield ourselves from threats, whether real or perceived. For example we establish schema that simplify life, reducing the volume of information we process to function, and they necessarily filter out information that does not fit our adopted pattern. Generally, they are effective ways of dealing with an otherwise complicated world, but we come to grief when confronted with a situation that does not fit our pattern, and which forces us to change entrenched beliefs or patterns of behaviour.

Our protections may affect our project if:

- We hold rigid concepts of how things should be organised and run, but others do not buy in, and prefer an alternate approach. We may feel frustration, anger or other emotions that indicate things are not as we would like.
- We behave arrogantly and aggressively as a protection for poor self esteem, whereas a person more comfortable with themselves might be more quietly assertive and achieve the same outcomes in an easier way.
- Criticism result in us being aggressive or defensive, either being reactions that result in us failing to address the issue, and increasing the level of strife and confusion.

**Expectations** relate to the future in that we aspire for or want things. There is pain when we recognise that we will not realise, in full or part, what we were seeking. We face this personally when issues arise which threaten deadlines and the project as a whole. We perceive there is a threat to our success and achieving the required outcomes. Often as our expectations are placed under threat we retreat to our protections and exhibit 'stress' behaviours. Among our stakeholders similar stress may be obvious where their expectations are not being met. Sponsors may become erratic and inconsistent in their requirements, statements of expectation, or the instructions and/or support they give. Trust may diminish (lack of trust is a protection against feeling vulnerable), and conflict is likely to increase.

Anything that disrupts the status quo may cause an adjustment to our expectations. Change increases confusion and uncertainty in our lives. In other words we experience heightened fog.

## Contributors to Personal Fog

At a personal level other examples of situations that contribute fog include:

- Taking positive steps into the unknown (even the good things create confusion!)
- Inaction or indecision placing us in a situation with diminishing options
- Shifting balances of power between ourselves and others

- Lack or loss of personal balance
- Lack of or disconnection from our purpose (short-term e.g. project or life purpose)
- Not having our needs met (at any one or more levels).

We each have different tolerances for confusion. At one extreme there are people who seem to live in confusion, enjoy it, and never emerge. It is problematic when confusion becomes an excuse for lack of action. At the other extreme are those who loathe confusion. They resist its existence. At this end it becomes an issue when certainty is artificially created. For example jumping to a speedy decision will create certainty, but it has closed out other potentially more beneficial options that further exploration would have identified.

All the factors listed above are compounded in team, group and organisational settings. Our different personalities, priorities and interests, and the various ways of learning, problem solving, reaching decisions and communicating we have aggravate fog factors. For example, different stakeholder groups will often have conflicting needs, requirements, and expectations. Any project direction may advantage some and disadvantage others. Tension develops. Conflict arises. Without understanding each group, what they want, seek, need, and what their issues, concerns and doubts are, it is very easy to get lost in mixed messages, false assumptions, and ill formed proposals.

## Managing Fog

### Ineffective Fog Management Approaches

There are plenty of ineffective ways of managing fog. Categories of ineffective strategy include:

- **Avoidance** – do anything but confront or deal with the area of concern; (e.g. Delaying tactics. Perfectionism may be used as a means for staying put and thus not having to venture where there is uncertainty)
- **Denial** – Refusal to accept the problem exists. (e.g. Refusing to acknowledge a crisis and pushing forward rather than facing it, hoping it will go away)
- **Aggression** – Any controlling behaviour used to manipulate relationships, stifle or corral the actions of others, and intended to elicit a specific response are forms of aggression. They constitute active patterns (intimidation and interrogation) and passive patterns (aloofness and ‘poor me’). Micro-management is an example of a well recognised controlling behaviour in a business context.
- **Façade** – Erecting a mask and attempting to portray something other than what is being experienced (e.g. false portrayal of confidence, using diversions to shift attention)

### Effective Fog Management Approaches

Key strategies that are effective in managing fog include:

**Be responsible FOR yourself:** Take ownership of our own behaviours, actions, feelings, results etc. Accept that it is up to us to manage our situation, and any issues we have. Recognise that we choose how we act, feel and behave and in large part determine the results we achieve. It energises us because as we choose and pursue our desired outcomes we strengthen the connection between choice and result.

**Be responsible TO others:** Act morally, legally and ethically and communicate our thoughts, feelings and needs appropriately. We will:

- fulfil our duties and obligations to others
- offer support
- work with others in a manner that promotes joint activities

- express issues and concerns directly (e.g. to management and/or clients) rather than bury them
- clarify when there is a misunderstanding
- seek support when we need help
- interact and work with others openly and with integrity
- be authentic in how we present ourselves to others
- not take responsibility for others, but encourage them to do that themselves.

**Be open and genuine:** Be your natural self and open to others. They will respect you as you present yourself with honesty and integrity. It was also enable trust to develop and enables dialogue, necessary understanding issues and problem solving to occur.

**Develop emotional intelligence:** This is a lifelong activity and focuses on the four main emotional competencies – *self-awareness* and *self-management* (personal competencies), *social awareness* and *relationship management* (social competencies).

**Assert yourself:** When being assertive you present your self, your needs, feelings and desires in a manner that enables others to understand your point and have a choice about what they do with it. Assertiveness can be very powerful because it is based on being honest, genuine and clear about your own intentions without threatening the boundaries of those being communicated with. On the other hand, aggression is the use of some level of violence to press for your outcomes, whether through physical, emotional or mental attack, by seeking to impose your will on others and reducing their ability to choose.

**Act ethically:** This includes behaving as a professional and abiding the Codes of Conduct (e.g. PMP Code of Conduct, corporate standards of conduct etc) that may apply to your work activities. It also includes being thoroughly integral in a situation. For example, providing all the information, good and bad, to a manager, providing full feedback on feedback (not hiding the negative issues under a sugar coating). Acting ethically means that you did:

- provide all necessary and important information (no filtering)
- act truthfully (e.g. did not adjust information to make it appear better than it really is)
- maintain your values and principles
- fulfil all obligations, duties and commitments
- place the greater good above personal and/or corporate gain when they were not compatible
- conclude with a clear conscience

**Apply ‘negative’ emotion for positive outcomes:** For example:

- Frustration indicates that current actions are failing so it may be time to consider trying an alternate approach (different action, new behaviour, change in attitude)
- Anger often indicates we feel violated, that a boundary has been crossed so taking steps to identify and strengthen the boundary and clarify what you consider inappropriate or unreasonable actions on the part of someone else may be required
- Anxiety indicates we feel unsafe, and do not trust we will be alright during or at the end of whatever is happening. It may be useful strengthening internal trust levels (of self and others) and/or speaking to someone who can help address the insecurities.

‘Negative’ emotions are powerful indicators that some shift or change is required, usually within ourselves. By acting positively on the feeling, which may often be through adjusting our own attitude or approach, we create power for ourselves.

**Deal with resentment quickly (yours and others):** Resentment is a responsibility issue, where a person has allowed someone else to take responsibility for them, or they are failing to be responsible to someone else. Blame and guilt are common companions. If not recognised and dealt with, resentment can grow like a cancer and resultant behaviours can undermine the whole project

**Delegate cleanly:** If you delegate tasks, then provide to the assignee:

- clear description of the outcomes or results sought
- boundaries that detail actions, behaviours or approaches that are not suitable
- hold them accountable for their performance

Delegation also requires that appropriate encouragement and support be offered so they can develop into a role. Positive feedback, constructive criticism and a lack of meddling can help establish trust under which the subordinate can prosper.

**Clarify and maintain boundaries:** Whether these relate to scope, job responsibilities, personal boundaries etc, fog increases where boundaries are allowed to shift and change without agreement. It suits some people to deliberately push and manipulate boundaries. If permitted then confusion increases. Scope changes without change control are equally undermining and fog-creating.

**Involve and rely on the team:** It can be easy, particularly in crisis, to assume all responsibility and act without consultation. It is important to involve team members and stakeholders, even if it seems inconvenient. Problem solving and decision making in isolation can create a false sense of clarity and progress, but the resulting confusion, misunderstanding and resentment among the team because of the lack of dialogue can lead to rejection of the initiative. A little time spent with the team can create better quality results, but does require us to loosen our control and be open to possibilities outside our own experience.

**Open to possibilities:** Enable others to participate in problem solving, decision making, and share information rather than keeping it tight. Listen to others' ideas. Trust and cooperation are strengthened with results and team cohesion improving as a result.

**Show empathy:** recognise the difficulty change you are introducing may cause others and then look for solutions and approaches that will ease their burden.

**Treat all team members fairly and equally:** Do not differentiate between organisational employees, contractors or suppliers. If people are contributing to your project they are part of the team. Involve them, treat them with respect and show trust. Emphasise "we" rather than "them", "us", "you, and "I".

**Don't confuse action with movement:** Making decisions and taking action do not contribute if investigation, reflection, planning and other preparation activities are required. Fog can instil a false sense of urgency where taking time for reflection might provide solutions. Maintain the eagle's strategic vision while our tactical view is obscured by the jungle.

**Confront control dramas:** Giving into these dramas robs the relationship of honesty and vitality, and within a project can undermine team performance. Find positive ways of diffusing the use of such dramas.

**Acknowledge your weaknesses:** Surround yourself with people who complement you. If you are defensive of your weaknesses much energy will be spent erecting protections against these becoming apparent.

**Monitor threatened individuals and groups:** Recognise that not all stakeholders necessarily support the project. Stay alert to those who may feel insecure because of the project. They require specific attention. Otherwise they will be working to their own ends without constraint, and may be creating all sorts of fog that will eventually envelope you.

**Act with integrity:** Do not compromise core values. Take right action regardless of consequence or criticism. Apologise where it is appropriate. If your values are significantly at variance to those of the organisation it is unhealthy to stay there long-term.

**Appreciate fog:** It is always an opportunity to take stock of and get better acquainted with a situation. Fog is also often a call for creativity and problem solving, and can be an opportunity to strengthen the team relationship and working capacity by appropriately involving them.

**Use relaxation techniques:** Any methods, practices and techniques that assist in creating a personal sense of peace and well-being enhance your ability to weather storms and manage fog more effectively.

**Be forgiving:** Expect performance and forgive short-comings. Apply this to yourself as much as to anyone else. When things go wrong many of us have a critical voice that creates discord within, reminding us of our shortcomings. Quiet the critic within, and do not be a critic of others. Be positive and supportive of colleagues, with an attitude of forgiveness. Where issues must be raised create a safe environment within which to provide feedback. Create a tolerant, accepting environment that enables people to learn, grow and develop safely.

## Conclusion

Fog is a daily reality. Dealing with it effectively requires personal awareness, application of self-mastery and self-discipline, openness to alternatives (even when they are not clearly identifiable), sound communication and interpersonal skills, a capacity to cope with ambiguity, and a willingness to learn and grow as an individual. Leadership requires the ability to recognise the effects of fog in others and to provide support necessary to help them individually and as a team to navigate it. Our attitude to and approach in dealing with fog has a powerful impact on future results. If we resist fog, fight it, we can create a monster that will eventually beat us into submission. If we appreciate fog, and see it as a neutral indicator of potential issues and as a natural outcome of change it becomes a powerful ally. By relying on fog to indicate areas we need to focus more attention we have greater opportunity to create positive results.

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## Biographical Sketch

Stephen Harrison, PMP is Managing Director of Harrison International Ltd, which provides training and consulting in project management, strategic management and leadership. As a **catalyst** (“*facilitating change with reduced pain*”) Stephen works with organisations and individuals to advance their capability and effectiveness. Stephen founded the PMI New Zealand Chapter and has served on the PMI Board of Directors at the international level for six years. In 2004 he was made a Fellow of PMI New Zealand and was awarded by PMI the 2004 PMI Distinguished Contribution Award. He may be reached through email at [stephen@harrison.co.nz](mailto:stephen@harrison.co.nz).